

THE MURDER OF ALEXANDER W. REA: COLUMBIA COUNTY'S MOLLY MAGUIRE TRIALS

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The Bloomsburg newspaper, *The Columbian and Democrat*, on October 23, 1868, carried an article entitled, "Outrageous Murder." It reported the brutal slaying of Alexander W. Rea, Superintendent of the Locust Mountain Coal and Iron Company and the Coal Ridge Improvement Company, that occurred on the morning of October 17, 1868. The victim was traveling from his home in Centralia to Mr. Carmel when a group of men stopped his buggy. Thinking he was carrying the company payroll, they planned to steal the money. Disgruntled that Rea did not have the payroll, and to avoid being later arrested, they decided to kill him so he could never identify them.

Within a short time, law officials arrested four individuals for the crime: Thomas Donahue, John Duffy, Michael Prior, and Patrick Hester. In three separate trials in the first part of 1869, the juries found Donahue, Duffy, and Prior "not guilty." Consequently, the District Attorney, Elijah R. Ikeler, after losing all three cases, decided to forego prosecuting the fourth defendant, Patrick Hester.

Eight years later at the height of the Molly Maguire trials in the anthracite region and when Daniel Kelly, a self-confessed accomplice in the murder of Rea, turned state's evidence, Columbia County held a fourth Rea murder trial in February 1877. This time the state brought homicide charges against Patrick Tully, Peter McHugh, and recharged Patrick Hester with murder. Tried as a single case, and widely reported as another Molly Maguire trial, the jury found all three guilty of murder. Unsuccessful in their judicial appeals and pleas for clemency, they became the only convicted criminals ever to be executed in Columbia County. The three men were hanged from a gallows in the jail yard located at the southwest corner of Center and First Streets on March 25, 1878.



Alexander Wurtz Rea